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Making use of Habermas in an empirical study

by
Helene Pristed Nielsen

**Working paper for Spirit presentation
on Thursday April 7th 2005**

Please do *not* quote from this paper without my explicit consent! This is intended as the final section of my second chapter, in which I develop my theoretical framework in dialogue with normative theorists such as Kymlicka, Rawls, and Habermas. Therefore parts of it will necessarily make most sense in its proper context...

Abstract

The present paper attempts to address the problems connected with using a normative theory of democracy as the backdrop for conducting analyses of empirical evidence on actual democratic interactions between the ‘mainstream’ white majority populations in Western Australia and New Zealand and the respective Indigenous populations in these locations. Thus this paper contains the crucial link between theory and practice within my research project, and hence the focus is on developing an analytic model on the basis of my theoretical framework, but a model that is applicable on actual data. As it is very much work in progress, questions are left for readers/listeners, and input is received with thanks ☺

Using Habermas’ notion of deliberative democracy in analysing empirical data does not present itself as a straightforward exercise to attempt. The Habermasian model is a theoretically derived notion based on certain ideal assumptions, among those people’s ability to express their standpoints and interests. While Habermas’ ideal premises for participation in such a debate are not as clearly spelled out as Rawls’ are with his concept of the veil of ignorance, it is clearly the case that both political philosophers operate with a list of more or less explicit assumptions about human capabilities in achieving just and fair democratic societies.

I have spent the former part of the present chapter attempting to show that from a normative standpoint the notion of deliberative democracy seems a desirable model to try to accommodate differences within. But even if I am conceded the point that the model may indeed be normatively desirable, the question still remains whether such a model makes sense in trying to analyse an empirical situation – in this case the level of interaction between Indigenous and mainstream interests in Western Australia and New Zealand. It appears necessary to bring Habermas’ model more down to earth and somehow transform it to be more directly applicable on my data.

One way of transforming the ideal of deliberative democracy into a more concrete model could be to see it as a model containing several sub-recommendations¹ concerning the interaction processes between various interests in society. Recall the four premises for a ‘masterless dialogue’ related in section 2.5.1 about Habermas’ model of deliberative democracy. These were

¹ I am interested in reactions to my use of the word ‘recommendations’ here...

- Everybody can partake in discussions
- Everybody can introduce and problematise any claim
- Everybody can freely express his/her attitudes, wishes and needs
- Nobody may be prevented through force from exercising these rights

With inspiration from Erik Oddvar Eriksen and Jarle Weigård's book *Understanding Habermas*², I have further developed these premises into what I see as several sub-recommendations or requirements for an adequate democratic dialogue in society. These I would characterise in the following way

- Access to express one's point of view
- Opportunity to express one's point of view
- Ability to express one's point of view
- Access to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them
- Opportunity to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them
- Ability to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them

This way of explicating as well as simplifying what I see as the core content of Habermas' theory has several advantages. First of all, it gives a better indication of what exactly I am looking for in these debates – this I will return to shortly. Secondly, it also explicates an implied assumption about communicative practices within any form of deliberation. Clearly, the first three of my six bullet points above speak about sending messages, whereas the last six are focusing on the receiving end. Both ends are extremely important both theoretically and empirically if one assumes that differences of interests are to be accommodated via dialogue. Yet I contend that it makes sense to think of these aspects separately, both to better understand the interests being pursued and the possible power relations between the sending and receiving ends of messages.

Lastly, I wish to add that the above list contains a major implied premiss for the debate, namely *interest* in expressing points of view and listen to those of other people. While Habermas takes for granted that citizens within a given society are interested in reaching a joint democratically achieved decision about points of interest to various people, and therefore are

² Eriksen, Erik Oddvar and Jarle Weigård, *Understanding Habermas. Communicative Action and Deliberative Democracy*, Continuum, London, 2003.

interested in voicing their own opinion and listen to that of others, I wish to explicate interest as a precondition for achieving such collaboration. Issues of Indigenous/mainstream cooperation can be viewed as collective action problems³ – something which would explain the necessary impetus for mainstream as well as Indigenous groups to participate in deliberating processes. By understanding politics and political decision making processes in this connection as attempts to solve collective action problems, I thus address the implicit question of volition in Habermas' theory. I will take up the question of interest again in my empirical analysis to show that the notion of 'collective action problems' is in fact not far removed from my respondents' own mindset. The question of volition has been added in parentheses in the table below, because it is not part of the theoretical and analytic questions proper; however, it does carry distinct empirical relevance, which is the reason for including it.

Returning to the question of what exactly it is I am looking for in the actual debates going on within Australian and New Zealand society, and how I propose to analyse my empirical material, I wish to further explicate the six sub-recommendations identified above. These six points can be reformulated into separate analytic questions that can be answered using empirical evidence. Thus the following concrete analytic questions will serve as my model for analysis in chapter 4 below, which contains the actual analysis of my data. The table below details the model I have in mind. I have collapsed the theoretical questions about access and opportunity to listen to other points of view into one analytic question, because this makes sense to analyse jointly, as questions of how the wider public is kept aware of debates is difficult to separate from questions of when and where this takes place.

³ A clear definition is still needed here – I am working on it. I plan to look at Mancur Olson's ideas, but other suggestions are most welcome...

| Theoretical recommendations | Analytic questions | Empirical evidence |
|---|---|---|
| (Interest in expressing one's point of view) | (Do various groups show interest in participating in debates?) | (Who partakes – and who does not?) |
| Access to express one's point of view | How does one access the 'system' or debate? | Structural and spatial aspects: Institutional structures, degree of openness, physical location and distance etc |
| Opportunity to express one's point of view | When do people debate? | Temporal aspects: Occasions for debate, political review processes etc |
| Ability to express one's point of view | Who participates in the debates? | Agency aspects: Resource & skills requirements, for example educational, ethnic and family background, questions of legitimacy, representation etc |
| Access to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them | How is the wider public kept aware of debates? | Structural, temporal and spatial aspects: Variety in form and content of media output available for public consumption, transparency in political decision making processes, legitimising efforts etc |
| Opportunity to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them | When and where is the wider public kept aware of debates? | |
| Ability to listen to other viewpoints and possibly be influenced by them | Which abilities do various institutions attempt to nurture in the wider public to further its 'listening capabilities'? | Agency aspects: The role of the educational system and different forms of media in exposing people to various life experiences etc |

The column detailing the empirical evidence one may look for in answering such questions has purposefully been left rather open ended at this point, because I do not wish to preempt my analytic conclusions. It is quite probable that each analytic question may be answered using even more types of empirical evidence, the above is only meant as an indication of where such evidence may be sought initially.

The model in the table above makes it possible to disregard whether my respondents themselves confess to a deliberative ideal – as this is indeed a theoretical *ideal*, it is highly unlikely to be part of the consciousness of deliberating parties. Rather, I shall be looking at to what extent it is possible to interpret presently ongoing interactions between Indigenous and mainstream interests in Australia and New Zealand as conforming with a deliberative benchmark. In other words, I will *not* be answering the question of whether deliberative democracy is a possible and feasible solution for gaining minority rights within these two countries. Rather, I will look at whether the presently ongoing interactions can be regarded as (subconscious) deliberative processes. Via this interpretative question I hope to conjoin my normative and pragmatic goals within this project. In other words, my focus will be on looking at whether the preconditions for a deliberative interaction between Indigenous and mainstream interests are present within the Western Australian and New Zealand setting. The preconditions here understood as the 6 theoretical recommendations developed in the table above, and the answer to be indicated by the answers to the 6 analytic questions raised in the same table, plus the question of interest.

Thus the end to this chapter containing my theoretical considerations for the research project could fittingly be used to formulate a more specific research question to guide the remaining investigations. This research question would be

Assuming that deliberative democracy is a normatively desirable ideal, to what extent is it possible to interpret ongoing processes of interaction between Indigenous and mainstream groups in Australia and New Zealand as conforming with a deliberative benchmark?⁴

A follow-up to this question would be whether any experienced differences in succeeding with harmonic coexistence between these groups can be explained by pointing to various degrees of development of the 6 theoretical recommendations for achieving the deliberative ideal – or whether

⁴ Feel free to comment on this formulation...

they might better be explained by pointing to historical factors. This question I will take up towards the end of my analysis, where I will explicitly compare the two settings for debate. However, I do not necessarily believe these two possible explanations to be mutually exclusive.

The conclusion to my chapter on the theoretical framework for this project was that traditional liberal and communitarian notions of minority rights seem to offer little by way of practical guidelines to what works and what does not work when attempting to accommodate difference in a given society. I also suggested that Habermas' notion of deliberative democracy, while still highly theoretical, might be viewed as a normatively more pleasing way to attempt to accommodate such differences. The next bridge to cross then, became the question of how to make use of Habermas' theory in an empirical study. This was the problem attacked above, where I tried to develop a model for analysis of empirical data. It is this model I shall be utilising here, where I will answer the analytic questions from the table above by looking at the empirical evidence suggested in the same table. I shall therefore unfold the analysis of my data according to the theoretical recommendations pinned out, namely the three categories of *access*, *opportunity* and *ability* to partake in debates. These three theoretical categories will form the bulk of my analytic development. However, I shall start by a short introductory chapter establishing the groups' interest in participating in such debates, as this was identified as an important implied premiss in Habermas' theory and therefore a prerequisite for analysing access, opportunity and ability to debate.

As accounted for in chapter 3 on methodology, I have conducted interviews within three 'spheres of deliberation', namely governance, education and media. The data from these interviews will be applied in the analysis according to how they can contribute to answering the analytic questions teased out above, namely

- How does one access the 'system' or debate?
- When do people debate?
- Who participates in the debates?
- How is the wider public kept aware of debates?
- When and where is the wider public kept aware of debates?
- Which abilities do various institutions attempt to nurture in the wider public to further its 'listening capabilities'?

In other words, the ensuing analysis will be unfolding according to the logic of the analytic model rather than according to which 'sphere of deliberation' I am applying data from. This means that in some cases data from for example media and governance will supplement each other in answering a specific analytic question. So despite the fact that the methodology was to some extent driven by a perceived need to obtain data from a variety of sources, the analysis itself will cross professional boundaries, as it is implausible that these spheres can be viewed in isolation. From a theoretical point of view, the million dollar question is whether access, opportunity and ability to participate in debates overall are present in a given society, not whether they are present only within a given niche of society, for example the sphere of education.

Above I developed a grid meant to give an overview of the theoretical recommendations or variables, the analytic questions raised by these, and the empirical data one might possibly look at to find the answers to the analytic questions. I see these analytic questions as very much standing in a dynamic relationship with one another, and to capture some of that dynamic flow and the interrelationships in my data I shall try to develop a model which can illustrate this and at the same time help visualise some of the points in the ensuing analysis.

I shall start by presenting what I call the basic model, which contains four different components, namely 'listening', 'expressing', 'individuals' and 'collectivities'. These components are derived from the theoretical considerations presented above. Here I developed a list of six different bullet points containing what I argued to be the major normative variables in the notion of deliberative democracy. I also noted that explicating these points highlighted the communicative practices inherent in the model of deliberative democracy, hence the first three points clearly referred to being able to *express* points of view, whereas the latter three concentrated on the receiving or *listening* end of the communication. Thus I argue that when analysing potentially deliberative practices, it is important to think of them as containing elements of both expressing and listening.

These components of 'expressing' and 'listening' can also be explained in less theoretical terms as in fact being respectively the arenas for debate and decision-making and the mediating arenas. In other words, I wish to maintain an analytic distinction between those areas of deliberation in which interests are being voiced (for example political decision-making fora or the media) and those areas in which information about decision-making and interests is being made available to the public (for example via the mass media or the education system).

A second look at the analytic questions schematised in the grid makes it apparent that besides a distinction between expressing and listening, there also seems to be an implied distinction between individuals or smaller groups of people and larger collectivities, cf. formulations in the grid about ‘one’ versus ‘the wider public’. This is in fact a distinction which I find both theoretically and empirically plausible. From a theoretical point of view, Habermas’ recipe for a masterless dialogue prescribes the behaviour of individual rational partners in dialogue: ‘Everybody can freely express his/her attitudes, wishes and needs’. These are individual preferences, which have to be justified collectively – if they cannot be so justified, the collectivity can dismiss them as being irrational and therefore not meriting recognition.

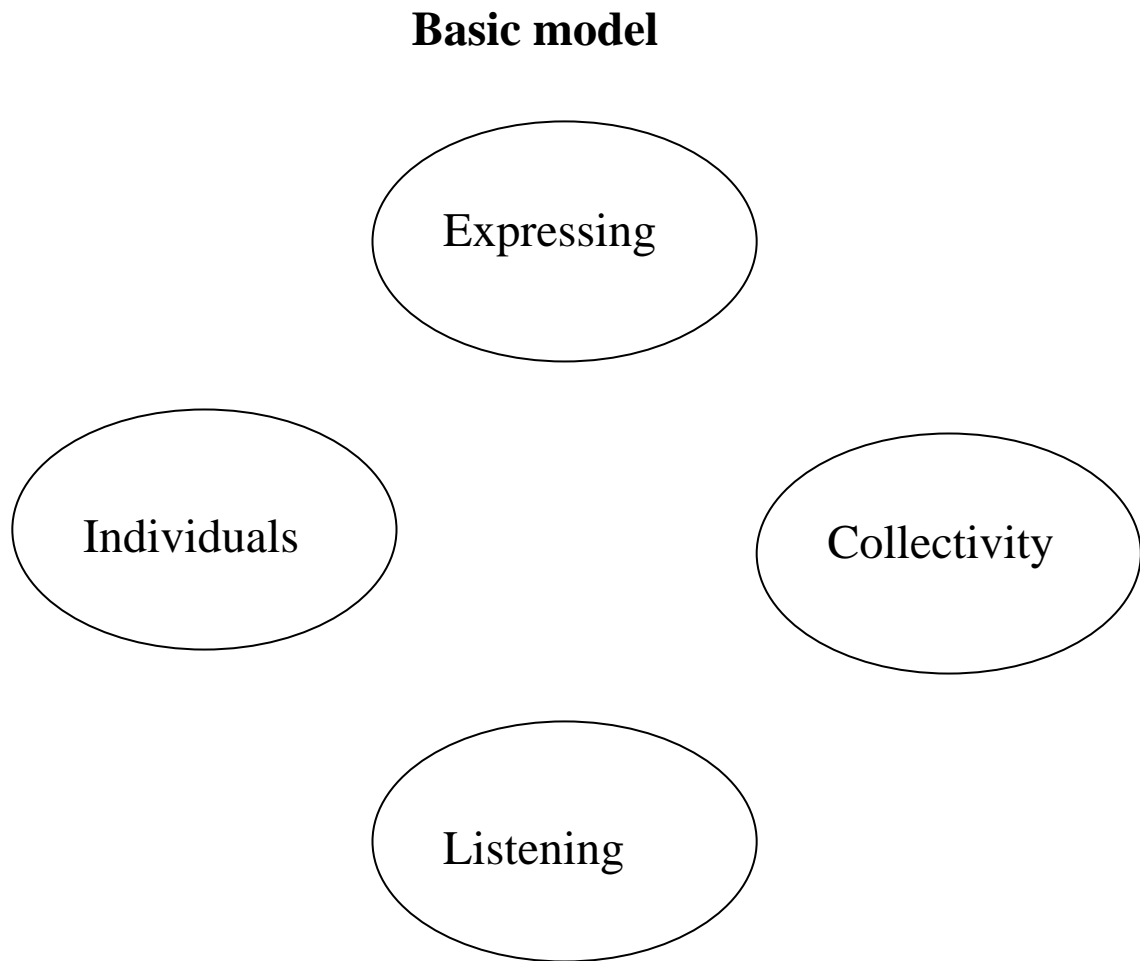
From an empirical point of view it also seems advisable to distinguish between individuals and collectivities. If *everybody* wants to have their opinion heard on specific policy issues, it would simply stall the system completely. Therefore collectivities have a tendency to assign authority to individual representatives who can express preferences on behalf of the group. Individual representatives may oscillate between representing and being represented, but the functional division tends to persist if the collectivity is sufficiently large. No matter whether I am speaking of the 1.6 million people living in Western Australia or the 4 million people in New Zealand, both populations are too large for everyone to get speaking time⁵.

One further important point to make about my distinction between individuals and collectivities is that not only may the position of ‘individual’ be taken up by different agents in the model below, but the same goes for ‘collectivities’; hence the rather odd plural form of the noun. By putting it in plural, however, I hope to underline the fact that the ‘collectivity’ referred to in single cases of deliberation may vary according to the subject being deliberated upon. Thus, in some cases, the collectivity will explicitly be the Indigenous population in either Western Australia or New Zealand, to which their individual representatives will be held accountable and which will act as receivers of political messages etc. At other times, the relevant collectivity might be the whole population in the city/state/country, children in the education system, or other types of groups.

The purpose of the model at present is exactly that it should be broad enough to facilitate a description of *any* potentially deliberative practice in any potential setting, and not just in my two countries of investigation here. Therefore the components in the basic model are indeed what I have argued to be *the basic components* of any deliberative practice, and are to be viewed as

⁵ I realise that I am skipping several important theoretical or philosophical assumptions here, but as I wish to retain a practical focus, I believe this is a justified statement to make.

‘placeholders’ that might be taken up by various individuals, groups and institutions according to which example or relationship one is focusing on in the analysis. In sum, I therefore see four major analytic components to investigating deliberative practices, these being *individuals*⁶, *collectivities*, *expressing and listening*. Schematically they can be rendered in the following way:



At present, of course, this is a very static model, which may say something about the components it is important to look at when analysing potentially deliberative practices, but hardly says anything about the *relationships* between these components. In fact, I would argue that there exists an abundance of possible relationships between them; relationships I hope to bring out in my ensuing

⁶ This is not meant to be understood as single persons speaking alone, but as one or more representatives speaking on behalf of others. The components of this basic model have been necessarily simplified at this stage to allow for further developments later on.

analysis of respectively *access*, *opportunity* and *ability* to partake in deliberative debates and listen to various viewpoints. This means that chapters 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4, which deal with these aspects in turn, each will start with a revised version of the basic model in which I shall add arrows indicating what I perceive as the dynamic flows between the components, and which it is important to get a grasp of to be able to evaluate the extent and quality of any possible deliberation taking place.

To give a short example of what I mean by this, I would for example argue that in the case of *ability* to debate, it is important to analyse the relationship between the collectivity and the individual to be able to assess to what extent the individual speaking on behalf of the collectivity is fairly representing the interests of the latter and how any authority has been conferred on this representative. In other words, I argue that several dynamic relationships may be thought into this basic model, and that some relationships are important when analysing ability aspects of deliberative processes, while other relationships have greater influence on for example issues of access. Each chapter in the analysis - access, opportunity and ability – will therefore be opened with a revised version of the basic model above, in each case including flow arrows indicating the dynamics of particular importance for each area of the analysis.

Notes for spirit presentation April 6th 2005

Background, criticism last time: use of Habermas and delib dem (why not consociational democracy)

Content of paper: attempting to operationalise theory and develop model for analysis. Go from theory to empirical approach

Habermas' four premises for dialogue + my own operationalisation (**overhead 1**). Comment on communication and interest as implied premises.

Overhead 2: table. Explain

Model: possible to disregard whether respondents confess to a deliberative ideal. Use it as benchmark in analysis. Are the preconditions present? Answer to be found by answering the analytic and theoretical questions from the table.

Reason for keeping the deliberative approach when perhaps not part of rationalisation by actors: purely normative... But also turns out that even if unexpressed, a lot of their rational choices in work and a lot of their reflections on their job make sense within a deliberative framework.

Debate content of research question: **overhead 3**

Using the data to answer the research question: go back to analytic questions in table (**overhead 2 back on**). Questions may be answered using data from various spheres of deliberation, cf compilation of data

Dynamic relationship between analytic questions => development of basic model. (**overhead 4, drawing on**). Explain components: communication = listening and expressing; 'One' and 'wider public'.

Underline the placeholder function, eg the plural form of collectivity, many different groups around the conference table etc...

Relationships between the placeholders or basic components/content of ensuing analysis: **put drawings on overheads on in turn**. Explain components and reasons for including them. Allow plenty of time for reaction...